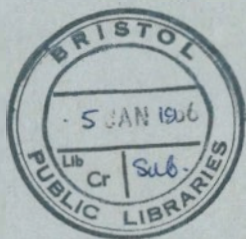


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# THE THEATRE ROYAL BRISTOL

DECLINE AND REBIRTH  
1834-1943

KATHLEEN BARKER, M.A.



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*The Theatre Royal, Bristol: Decline and Rebirth (1834-1943)* is the fourteenth in a series of pamphlets issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association through its standing Committee on Local History (Hon. Secretary, Miss Ilfra Pidgeon). In an earlier pamphlet, first published in 1961, Miss Barker dealt with the history of the Theatre Royal during the first seventy years of its existence. Her work attracted great interest, and a second edition was published in 1963. She now brings up to modern times the largely untold and fascinating story of the oldest provincial theatre with a continuous working history. For nearly twenty years she has spent much of her spare time on this subject, and she hopes one day to be able to publish a full-length book on the Theatre Royal to replace the inadequate and long out-of-print accounts of Powell and Watts. Meanwhile this authoritative pamphlet by the leading expert on the history of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, is offered to the public in the year which sees the two hundredth anniversary of the opening of the theatre.

In the course of 1966 the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association hopes to publish works on the history of the Bristol Madrigal Society, on eighteenth-century travellers' accounts of Bristol, on the Bristol and Exeter railway, and on the early history of the Quakers in Bristol.

Other titles under consideration include Bristol castle, the Blue Maids' School, the Anti-Slavery Movement in Bristol, the industrial monuments of Bristol, and additions to the separate series of pamphlets on the history of the Port of Bristol.

The pamphlets have enjoyed a wide circulation. *The Bristol Hotwell* is now out-of-print, and the *Theatre Royal: the First Seventy Years* has gone into a second edition. The price of the pamphlets has been kept as low as possible so that they may be available to a wide circle of readers. Rising costs of printing and increased postal charges present a serious problem, but it is hoped that increased sales will make it possible to maintain present prices.

The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74, Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. Details of earlier publications are given at the back of this pamphlet. It will be of great assistance if as many people as possible will place standing orders for future productions.

THE THEATRE ROYAL, BRISTOL  
DECLINE AND REBIRTH  
(1834 — 1943)

by *Kathleen Barker, M.A.*

The Victorian age is not one on which the theatre historian looks back with any great pleasure, although it is one of considerable interest. The London theatrical scene was initially dominated by the two great Patent theatres of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, both rebuilt on a scale too large to suit "legitimate" drama. Around them had sprung up a myriad Minor Theatres, legally able only to offer spectacle and burletta: a character in which they were too well established for the passing of the Act for Regulating the Theatres, which ended the monopoly of the Patent theatres in 1843, to make much difference. It was an era of a handful of considerable, if not great, actor-managers with virtually no contemporary plays of stature to put on; an era that saw the growth of production and décor within a type of stage we have now come to take for granted (and more recently to rebel against); an era that saw the theatre lose its status as "rational entertainment" and regain it only at the cost of propagating snob appeal.

This state of the metropolitan theatre induced one even less satisfactory in the provinces. The last half of the 19th Century saw the almost complete extinction of the Stock Companies, though some of them, notably the Kent circuit of Sarah Thorne and the North Midland theatres of the Savilles, fought gamely on. Instead the starring system extended itself into the touring company system; small country theatres were no longer adequate to mount the new type of productions; there no longer seemed a settled public anxious to be served by the theatre.

Sociologists may argue how far the revival of strict religious and moral teaching, and the tremendous — in some areas, overwhelming — changes in local life brought about by the exhausting Napoleonic Wars, the Industrial Revolution, and by their joint aftermath, were independent of the cultural factors mentioned above<sup>1</sup>. It was certainly not a settled, culture-conscious city on which Sarah M'Cready could call for support when she took her first temporary lease of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, at the beginning of 1834. Moreover, the Proprietors, still smarting after their

1 Muriel Jaeger: *Before Victoria* (Chatto & Windus) provides a perceptive analysis of the changes in outlook between the ages of George III and Victoria.

recent prolonged, and largely unsuccessful, battles over rent with defaulting Managers, insisted not only on short leases, which made it difficult and little worth while to build up stocks of scenery and costumes (or indeed a settled Company), but also on a clause permitting prompt ejection of the lessee if the rent became in arrears.

On the credit side, Mrs. M'Cready was able to draw on a wealth of goodwill in certain quarters — the Mayor, the City M.P's., the Masonic Lodge to which her late husband had belonged, and even the Duke of Beaufort, all patronised "bespeaks" which produced a crowded theatre. She could count, too, on her stepson William Charles Macready, though he had little time for Mrs. M'Cready's first Stage Manager, whom he described as a "miserable bawler". His attitude is well exemplified by the entry in his diary for 5th September, 1834:

"Went early to rehearsal upon the promise, though not with the expectation of seeing it realized, of having the last scene of *Sardanapalus* tried. On reaching the theatre I found nothing ready, all things in confusion. The general inactivity, from the sleepiness of the manager to the sulkiness of the property man, was remarkably conspicuous. There was no head to give impulse and energy to the limbs of the concern, and I felt annoyed to see this woman's money thrown away by the supineness and apathy of those whom she was paying. I therefore gave my assistance and saw much done, and ordered more, that contributed to put the play forward."

On another occasion he suffered from the over-attention of the prompter who, misunderstanding the intention of the "Macready pauses", "kept shouting 'the word' to me until I was ready to go and knock him down".

Audiences, however, even when numerous, were not always well-behaved. Wallack's benefit in February, 1834, was interrupted by drunken demonstrations, so that at one stage the police had to be called in. Even during Macready's farewell performance of *King Lear* in January, 1850,

"both the dramatic corps and the audience were surprised to observe a black terrier dog protruding his glossy head from out of a private box on the stage, in which sat three military officers, who were endeavouring to excite him to give an audible manifestation of applause; but the animal possessing it would seem a higher appreciation of the performance than his master, refused to take the hint, and sat looking on with a grave and solemn face, wondering what it was all about".

This episode, unmentioned in Macready's Diary, did not prevent

him from taking a very warm farewell of the city with which he had had close contacts for thirtyfive years.

Interior decoration, stock scenery and warbrobe were all in parlous condition at the time of Mrs. M'Cready's takeover. With little or no capital behind her, she could initially do no more than clean the theatre, and provide a new Green Curtain and act drop; but by the end of the 1835 season Richard Smith, writing in the *Bristol Journal*, was congratulating her on the improvement in the scenery and dresses. Despite tepid public support she continued to renovate the theatre, adding private boxes in 1835, and in 1837 redecorating the interior, the Saloon being "fresh painted in landscape".

The following year she addressed a firm letter to the Committee of Proprietors:

"Gentlemen —

"I beg with every feeling of gratitude for past favours, conferred on me by you, to submit to your notice the following alterations which are so necessary for the improvement and safety of the Theatre Royal, Bristol.

To erect a new Paint Room.

The one which we are now using over the Pit is considered extremely dangerous from the immense weight of the scenery and Property's, which we are of necessity compelled to keep there. Another entrance is greatly required — The Performers not being able to go through the Pit Passage are obliged to enter by the Box Lobby, which renders it exceedingly unpleasant for the Ladies and Gentlemen visiting the Theatre. Likewise Gentlemen some alteration in the Green Room and my room for it has been impossible to have any fire in either room during the greatest part of that severe weather."

Mrs. M'Cready's plea was reinforced by the Insurance Office's objection on the grounds of fire risk to a stove being used "in the place over the ceiling of the Pit lately used as a Painting Room". Ultimately it was agreed to transform part of the Green Room into a Scene Dock, an arrangement continuing to this day.

Reading the Minutes of the period, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Committee of Proprietors, genuinely as they appreciated Mrs. M'Cready's game struggle to keep the Theatre open, were reluctant to face the problems presented by its deteriorating fabric and increasingly outmoded facilities. They would meet a current crisis, but in their anxiety to maintain good dividends they failed to build up essential reserves.

Mrs. M'Cready herself made little enough profit from the management, though in an attempt to make the most use of the

theatrical year she continued her husband's policy of touring the Welsh seaside resorts in the summer<sup>2</sup> and even, in 1845, took over the lease of the Bath Theatre. Season after season she had to report disappointing receipts, but she doggedly kept going. Typically she commented in one end-of-season address:

"I own I feel much pride in stating, that although Covent Garden Theatre has been shut for some time, and the Theatre Royal, Liverpool, has been prematurely closed for want of funds to support them, yet the Bristol Theatre has continued open its legitimate season."

The standard repertoire of the period reflects accurately the uncertain powers of attraction of the theatre. Except on behalf of visiting stars like Macready, Phelps and Charles Kean, the "classics" were rarely produced, and even local productions reflected the growing emphasis on lavish costuming and realistic detail. A revival of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1841 advertised ominously "the New and Gorgeous SCENERY and DRESSES, the WOODLAND SCENERY and FAIRIES' DANCES . . . [providing] the most perfect coup d'oeil ever presented in the Bristol Theatre".

When Kean brought his production of *Macbeth* to Bristol in 1845 the bills duly proclaimed:

"A large sum of Money has been expended on this celebrated Play, which upon this occasion will be placed upon the Bristol Stage in a manner never witnessed out of a London Theatre. New Scenery, Dresses, Armour, Weapons, &c., as taken from the highest authorities; and for the first time on any Stage, *the Correct Costume of the period* (1046), will be represented. All the Original (*sic*) Music of Locke will be introduced, and the Band increased to give it due effect".

That all this expensive realism was not always taken too seriously, however, is strongly suggested by a note to a mid-century pantomime which announced: "THE DRESSES — a happy mixture of the costumes of every age and nation, sufficiently *inaccurate* to satisfy the most *unscrupulous*".

The newly-legitimized Minor Theatres of London also supplied their stars, but on the whole the tradition of these houses was burlesque and spectacle, and the pieces they brought to Bristol were of these types. Remarkable attempts were made to reproduce the picturesque and sensational effects in dramas such as *The Jewess*, *Valsha*, or, *The Slave Queen* or *Van Diemen's Land*.

2 See Cecil Price: *The English Theatre in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948).

Since opera was in many quarters regarded as more respectable than drama, opera stars and whole companies were very frequently engaged. Mr. and Mrs. Wood brought *Norma*, allegedly "for the first time on the English stage", in September, 1841; Jenny Lind gave a concert in September, 1847, and Grisi sang in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Ballet began to emerge as an entertainment in its own right instead of merely being an entr'acte, a bon-bon amid more solid fare, intended to keep the "Gods" quiet between the main play and afterpiece. Not everyone approved of this "tossing about of legs" but stars of the calibre of Fanny Elssler, Cerrito and Taglioni could be relied upon to bring in the crowds.

In 1845, when Mrs. M'Cready took on the lease of the Bath Theatre, James Henry Chute became her Stage Manager. Legend has it that his match with her daughter Mazzarina in 1844 was a "runaway" one, but if so, they must soon have been forgiven, for Chute rapidly became Mrs. M'Cready's right hand man, negotiating contracts on her behalf as well as supervising the productions. He later proved a tremendous believer in the establishment of provincial companies in their own right, independent of touring "stars", as the only way of ensuring a healthy state of affairs in the theatre outside London — a viewpoint which looked both back and forward but was by no means accepted at the time.

In a bid to bring in the "holiday folks" attending the September Fair in 1851, the admission prices were reduced to almost half. This expedient at least temporarily increased audiences and was frequently followed in years to come during the theatrically slack summer months.

However, in 1852 an even more effective attraction was found — the dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in various versions of various portions of the tale (some contrived by Chute himself). By this time Chute had formally given up the Stage Management to take over the administration, for Mrs. M'Cready was gradually failing, and after a short illness died on 8th March, 1853. Her obituary notice accurately describes her as "an actress of more than average ability, and a woman of considerable energy and tact". Chute asked for, and was granted, the transfer of the lease,<sup>3</sup> and completed the current season with his managerial benefit, a

3 Mrs. M'Cready's will contained the "earnest hope that the Proprietors of the Bristol Theatre in consideration of their old Tenant and that my Property in the Theatre is of a kind which is only available on the Spot will consent to receive my said Son-in-Law Mr. Chute as Tenant thereof in my stead for the benefit of my daughter and Grandchildren".

most successful occasion only marred "by a gentleman in the dress circle being seized with a fit".

Chute lost no time in getting to work to bring the Theatre up to the standards he aimed at. Despite the high fire risk associated with theatres, the Proprietors had refused to have the Company's water laid on: Chute had the premises connected to the mains at his own expense. The gas piping, in dangerous disrepair, was totally renewed. The interior was drab and peeling; it was repainted in lemon, French grey and white, and the ceiling covered with allegorical paintings. The stage was greatly extended and the scenic resources improved; new dressing rooms were added. In fact, Chute's enthusiasm somewhat outrode his discretion, and in an ingenuous letter to the Proprietors he had to ask for some financial help — "for I must confess, that I have laid out more money than I intended upon the Premises, but expense after expense crept in and one necessity begat another till I found myself fairly in for it".

The repertoire and company were overhauled at the same time. Though far from despising the popular successes of the day — the burlesques, the inevitable *Uncle Tom* and the various "sensation dramas" of Boucicault and his school — Chute introduced a considerable number of Shakespearian revivals, although the texts he used were still the old adaptations. George Melville, a "provincial tragedian" of some repute, accepted recurrent engagements of several months at a time, and became hugely popular in leading Shakespearian roles. Several members of the Wilton and Robertson families were also recruited, the most famous of whom were of course Marie Wilton (Lady Bancroft) and Madge Robertson (Dame Madge Kendall). Some of the most famous names of the late Victorian theatre are found in Chute's companies of the 1850's and 60's — Kate and Ellen Terry, Henrietta Hodson (Mrs. Labouchère, who "managed" Lily Langtry's stage career for some years), Charles Coghlan and many others.

In their memoirs these actors and actresses pay generous tributes to Chute's personality and methods, and William Rignold, later to star at the Olympic and Drury Lane, gives a vivid picture of the Manager as he encountered him when first he began his Bristol engagement:

"Our governor is a fine looking man, deep in the chest, broad in the shoulder — well set up, twinkling eyes — that can be severe — broad massive forehead and large moustache. His hands are Frenchy in their action, and he is never seen without a pair of gloves — which I am told he has never



been known to put on".<sup>4</sup>

The contemporary press, however, was by no means always complimentary, and one actor quitted the company in disgust at what he considered unjust criticism by one of the weekly papers.

Chute's most insistent critic was E. W. Godwin, a rising young Bristol architect and aesthete, later to be Ellen Terry's lover and father of Gordon and Edith Craig. Under the heading "Theatrical Jottings" he wrote notices for the *Western Daily Press*, and his passion for exactitude in historical costuming, advanced artistic theories and perfectionist standards generally made him an outspoken and sometimes vicious critic of Stock Company productions with their inevitably limited resources of wardrobe, scenery and manpower. A typical comment was that with which he greeted a production in 1864 of *Romeo and Juliet*:

"It is quite hopeless to expect anything in the way of decent scenery and dresses upon the Bristol stage? On *Juliet* and *Romeo* we had sleeves of the period of Edward III, and bodices of a century or two later, with a scalloped hat and feather of no period at all. The nurse was in costume two centuries later even than the time of Shakespeare himself!"

About the acting he was even more scathing, saying that he nearly went home when he saw some of the casting, and he excepted from his criticism only Kate Terry's Juliet, which drew down upon him the satiric enquiry from a later correspondent: "Is it the fact that Miss Terry, who is *now* the deity that 'Jottings' swears by, never got a favourable notice till she had 'tea'd' with the critic?"

Godwin's "teas", which were to have such a devastating effect on the lives of the Terrys — for it was at one such that he first made Ellen's acquaintance — are described by Ellen Terry herself in her memoirs and more fancifully re-created by Marguerite Steen.<sup>5</sup> It need hardly be said that his type of criticism infuriated Chute, and when certain local buildings designed by Godwin developed rather noticeable defects, he could not be restrained from inserting (though not in the *Western Daily Press*) a mock "advance notice":

"Various Novelties are in preparation, amongst them will be found a Bee-in-the-Bonnet kind of Drama, founded upon

4 Quoted in Rennie Powell: *The Bristol Stage — Its Story* (Bristol, 1919), which contains invaluable (though very partial) information about the Chute "dynasty".

5 Marguerite Steen: *A Pride of Terrys* (Longmans, 1962).

Psychological Science; resulting from Cerebral Derangement and Phrenetic Imitation, leading to Infallible Indicia, entitled **MONOMANIA; or SOFTENING OF THE BRAIN.**

With a view to insure efficient representation, the Manager hopes that he will be able to prevail upon the celebrated 'THEATRICAL JOTTINGS' to undertake the principal character.

The pictorial illustration will comprise — The House that 'Jottings' built upon the Down — The Broken Arches in Stoke's Croft — And the Curiosities from 'Highbury'".

A notable feature of Chute's management was the establishment of the Christmas pantomime in the form usually referred to, not very accurately, as "traditional". The "play" was based on a fairy tale and concluded with a Harlequinade; lavish scenery, magic transformations, topical allusions and puns in abundance were essential ingredients. Occasionally "speciality acts" were introduced, but at first these were frowned on.

In 1861 Chute was granted an 8½ years' lease of the entire theatre property, including the adjacent houses, at a yearly rent of £400, but only the following year he received a severe blow. Early in the morning of Good Friday, 1862, the Bath Theatre, whose lease Chute had also taken over at his mother-in-law's death, caught fire and was burned to the ground, and a large quantity of dresses and scenery, not insured, were lost in the blaze. The building of a new theatre, however, was prosecuted with great energy, and a new Theatre Royal, Bath, was opened on 4th March, 1863, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — a copy of Kean's Princess's Theatre production, with Ellen Terry as Titania. Her dress was designed by Godwin, who was also responsible for some of the interior decoration of the Theatre.

Shortly afterwards Ellen Terry left the stage on her disastrous marriage to G. C. Watts. Kate returned alone in the autumn of 1864 for a short engagement, taking her farewell in an address, written by dramatist Tom Taylor, of excruciating coyness (and, bearing in mind the facts of Ellen's marriage, rampant bad taste):

"A year has wov'n its web of mingled dye  
Into my life since here I bade 'good-bye',  
But not alone — a sister by my side  
Then shared my gratitude and swelled my pride.  
Miss Terry's now no more — Nelly for life  
Plays woman's highest, hardest part — 'The Wife;'<sup>6</sup>

6 The reference is to Sheridan Knowles' popular play *The Wife — a Tale of Mantua*.

Poor Kate — still single — for your hands must sue,  
But oh, believe her, grateful still for two!"

The Theatre Royal, Bristol, was deemed "the most perfect theatrical training ground" of the period, but it was little wonder that the zealous Chute, constantly worried about dilapidations, cramped scenic facilities, and the general "run-down" of the King Street area as the western suburbs developed into fashionable residential districts, decided on the bold move of creating a theatre of his own on the boundary of Bristol and Clifton, in Park Row. It was erected within eight months of clearing the site, and opened on 14th October, 1867, as the New Theatre Royal.<sup>7</sup> It held nearly double the current capacity of the King Street theatre, which could take 230 in the Dress Circle, 250 in the Upper Circle, 24 in the Private Boxes, 300 in the Pit and 430 in the Gallery.

In an editorial on the opening of "Our New Theatre", the *Bristol Gazette* commented:

"It was quite time, if the reputation of Bristol were to be maintained, that she should have a second Theatre provided for her in some more convenient locality than that of King-street — convenient, we mean, to the vast population that now spreads over Clifton, Cotham, Redland, &c. There is plenty of room, we are sure, for two well-managed Theatres in a city the size of Bristol, but what was wanted by denizens of Clifton and the surrounding district was a 'dramatic temple' which they could visit without the long and tedious journey into town, and back again, being enforced upon them."

Chute of course retained the lease of the King Street theatre, and he put in as Manager Arthur Wood, who had been a popular low comedian in the Stock Company some years previously. For a few months the two theatres continued side by side, with some interchange of players (occasionally actors had to play both theatres the same night). The Christmas pantomime was cut short in order to give it a showing at Bath, and after a visit from Marie Wilton's *Caste* Company, and (by way of contrast) performances by the Wandering Troupe of Beni-Zoug-Zoug Arabs and the Grand English Opera Company, the theatre closed. And closed it remained, except for a month's hiring by "Professor" Anderson, a conjurer, until the next Christmas holidays.

The reason is not far to seek; Chute's resources had been over-

<sup>7</sup> The Proprietors of the King Street Theatre not unnaturally took strong exception to the assumption of this title by a non-Patent theatre, and in 1884 it was renamed "The Prince's". It was irreparably damaged in the first heavy air-raids on Bristol in 1941 and the last traces were demolished in 1964.

strained by trying to run both the Bath and the two Bristol theatres (to say nothing of the £15,000 expended in building the Prince's). In April 1868 the Committee of Proprietors "received a notification that Mr. Chute the lessee had been obliged to place his affairs in the hands of Messrs. W. H. Williams and Co. with a view to making an arrangement with his creditors". In May he gave up the Bath lease, and it is clear that thenceforth he devoted all his attention to the Park Row house and let the Old Theatre Royal deteriorate. In July 1874 the Proprietors had to threaten him with legal action if repairs were not carried out.

During the ten years following Chute's near-bankruptcy, the Theatre was opened only spasmodically, and then mainly for visits by touring companies. H. J. Byron selected it for the première of his drama *Widow and Wife* in July 1876 (another of his plays, *The English Gentleman*, had previously been premièred in Bristol). His company included the former manager, Arthur Wood, and the play ran for two weeks, but it was deemed a poor, weak specimen of its kind, relying heavily on "limelight and slow music". The following year the Haymarket Company, who specialised in classical comedy, played *The Rivals* with Buckstone, whose farewell provincial tour this was, as Bob Acres. But the staple fare was either sensation drama or Robertsonian comedy.

On 23rd July 1878, James Henry Chute died, quite suddenly, and only a few months after his wife. His sons George and James Macready Chute took over management of both Bristol theatres, but when the lease ran out in 1881 they were as reluctant to renew as the Proprietors to offer renewal. The Proprietors' hand was strengthened by a letter from the very popular actor George Melville, applying for a lease on behalf of his manager-brother Andrew. They broke off negotiations with the Chutes and sued them for the cost of repairs; they finally settled for £210.

Melville went vigorously to work during November, 1881, and the result was very much the theatre we know to-day. He cut back the stage five feet to its present position; rebuilt the proscenium arch with niches for vases; built the wide stone staircases to the Gallery and Upper Circle; substituted "Phipp's patent chairs" for the divided benches in the Dress Circle; opened up the sides of the boxes, and not least provided us with the original of the present ceiling. The *Western Daily Press* reporter wrote:

"The decoration is most elaborate and tasteful, the chief colours being pink, French grey and green, profusely ornamented with gilt moulding. The ceiling is a very pretty piece of work, and reflects great credit upon the designer and those to whom the execution of the work has been entrusted. In

the centre is a new ventilator, 9 ft. in diameter, most elaborately decorated and gilded, and enclosed in a heavy gilt moulding. In each corner is a handsomely designed medallion, enriched with gilding”.

Nor was the practical stage side neglected. “Under the direction and supervision of Mr. James Owen, the machinist . . . all the latest improvements in theatrical mechanism have been introduced”, including three new bridge traps, three star traps and a “vampire” trap. No wonder the *Bristol Times and Mirror* claimed “Mr. Melville has made it one of the brightest, prettiest and most comfortable theatres in the provinces”.

George Melville was engaged as leading man, and great applause greeted his first line: “I see you know me”. The choice of play ranged from *Hamlet* to pseudo-historical dramas, though it was rather an anti-climax when George was succeeded by Andrew (“Mr. Emm”) in a programme of vulgar farces.

Melville pantomime became a national by-word, particularly in the provinces, though the first one in Bristol (*St. George and the Dragon*, with “Mr. Emm” as Tell Tale Tit, St. George’s servant) had an uncertain start.

“Before the curtain went up Mr. Melville came before the footlights and, addressing the audience, which was a tolerably numerous one, said it was a question with the management before the doors were opened whether they should have an afternoon performance, or put the first performance off until the evening. However, as the afternoon performance had been announced, he did not like to disappoint those who were present. In rebuilding the theatre, reconstructing the auditorium, and providing fresh scenery behind, the management had perhaps attempted too much. They had nearly a hundred persons engaged in the representation of the pantomime, and in fact they had more people almost than they could find room for. They also had more scenery than they could work, and more dresses than they could use.”

The pantomime fortunately proved a huge success; it was lavishly publicised and by dint of constant introduction of new speciality acts, ran till 4th March, outlasting the Park Street Theatre pantomime by a week. The director of a touring company in March 1882 went out of his way, in a curtain speech, to praise the hospitality of the management and the comfortable arrangements made for his company. All seemed once more set fair.

Unfortunately appearances were deceptive. By January 1884, Melville was nine months in arrears with his rent and had not yet approved his draft lease. After another five years of wrangling

with the Proprietors over rent reductions, the erection of a Refreshment Bar, and repairs to the rapidly-decaying houses fronting the theatre. Melville finally rid himself of the lease in 1893; offering to guarantee the first five years' rent of the tenant, John Barker, of the Grand Theatre, Nelson.

Hearing of this, the owners of adjoining business premises, Messrs. Ford & Canning, offered to buy the Theatre for £3,500, on which Melville promptly claimed the right of pre-emption "as being already the owner of one fifth of the property" (he was by far the largest single shareholder in the Theatre) "besides being the Lessee", and offered £50 more. The Proprietors were advised that both offers were well under the value of the property, so nothing came of the discussions, but from then on, as the building became more expensive to keep up, and more out of date as a theatre, the idea of sale was never far from the Proprietors' minds. Barker, soon after taking up the lease, got behind with his rent and to Melville's disgust the Committee of Proprietors insisted on retaining the dividends on his shares to compensate themselves under Melville's guarantee.

In May 1895 Barker in turn transferred his lease to Ernest Carpenter of the Darwen Theatre, whose family continued the management, with varying credit, for over thirty years. Carpenter opened with a pantomime, a fairly sure draw, which included a song dedicated by the composer to Bristol Football Club, called "Play Up, Bristol". It was sufficiently successful to celebrate with a supper on the stage, at which the Company and stage hands presented Arthur Carpenter, the Manager, with a "handsome oak spirit stand".

Carpenter has also to his credit the establishment of the first Bristol weekly repertory company (still of course referred to as a Stock Company) which played throughout the summer of 1895. Its first production was the melodramatic *Driven from Home* (fitted with striking local scenery) which suited the Whitsuntide audience, who "cheered the heroine and hooted the villain with a vigour remarkable even on a Bank Holiday". Another successful play was Tom Taylor's *Ticket-of-Leave Man*, again very well mounted. Carpenter concentrated his appeal on the pit and gallery and for the next fifteen years melodrama and rollicking pantomime held undisputed sway in King Street, while the great stars and the touring attractions went to the Prince's Theatre. The fatal dichotomy between "popular" and "socially respectable" entertainment was established.

By no means all the discredit into which the theatre fell can be blamed on the management. The very fabric of the theatre was

**"THE TWO HOMES"**  
**VALEDICTORY ADDRESS.**

spoken by  
**MISS KATE TERRY,**  
AT THE  
**THEATRE ROYAL, BRISTOL,**

*Friday, November 28th, 1862.*

A SIMPLE maid, in days not long gone by,  
From her own native city chanced to roam;  
Seeking a resting-place—no matter why—  
Far, far away from her beloved home!

Scarce had she gained her weary journey's end,  
When smiling glances beamed in many an eye;  
While loving hands seemed ready to extend  
Their welcome greetings as she ventured nigh:  
And tender voices sounded in her ear,  
Bidding her banish every doubt and fear!

"Night Phantoms" hither "danced," now thither fled,  
Or stooped to bless the sleeper as she lay;  
"Angels of Midnight" hovered near her bed,  
Nor ceased their watching until "Peep o' Day;"  
And when the morning sun began to rise,  
Visions were changed for sweet realities!

Dear friendly forms now hastened to her side,  
With smiles as fair as those which blessed her dreams;  
"Like and unlike," the wondering maiden cried,  
Not home, and yet the same as home it seems!  
Oh! happiness, that hither I should come  
To find no "strange abode," but "a new Home."

Dear Friends! have I succeeded to rehearse  
My simple story, and my sister's too?  
And have I sung in this imperfect verse  
The gentle kindness we've received from you?  
Kindness that bids our grateful hearts now swell,  
And shall for ever in our memories dwell!

Henceforth we'll call this place our "other Home,"  
And trust (though life uncertain be and short)  
That we again, and yet again may come,  
Ere we grow old, and be "Laid up in Port."  
Good bye, then, 'till we meet again—come Nell,  
And bid with me—our Bristol Friends—Farewell.

Printed on silk, this souvenir of Kate and Ellen Terry's first engagement at the Theatre Royal, Bristol, incorporates references to the entertainments in which they played. The address was written by popular dramatist (and University of London Professor) Tom Taylor, a lifelong friend of the Terry family.



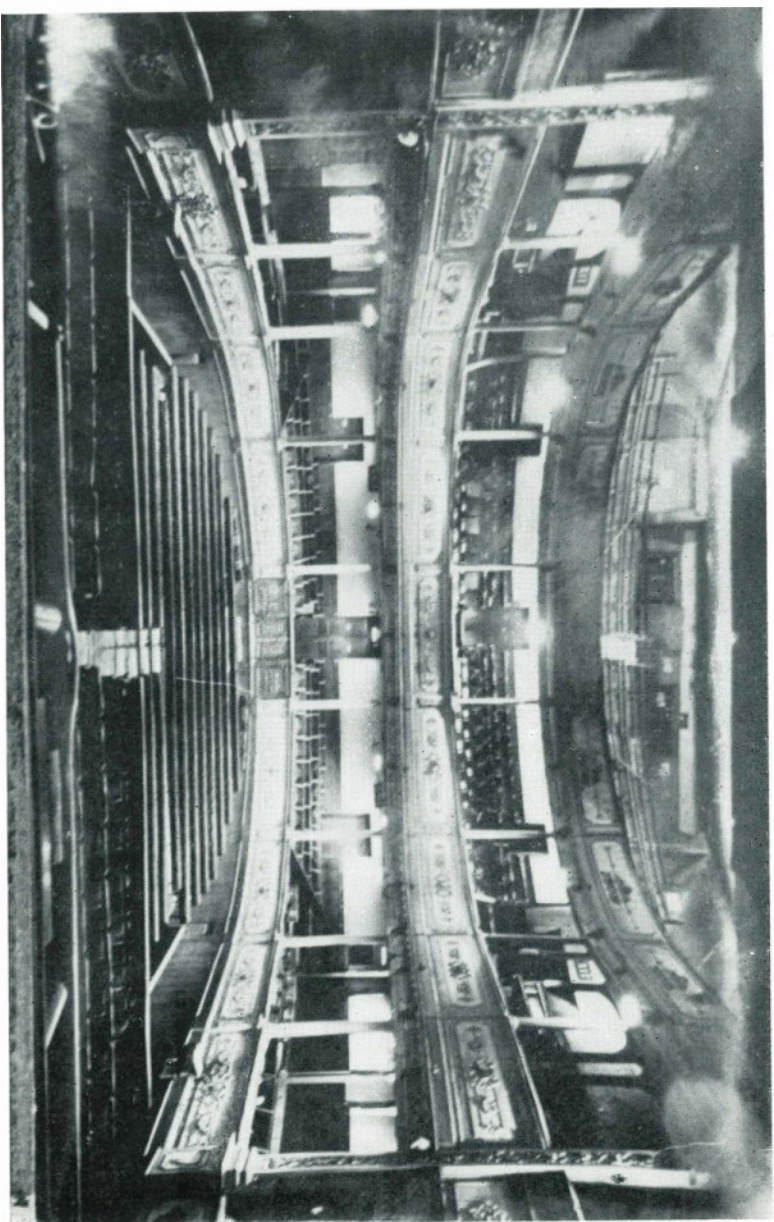
Right, a drawing of the façade in 1841 (from Archives Department). Both these illustrations show compared with the 1887 photograph reproduced in Watts: *Theatrical Bristol* and the Theatre Trustees pamphlet, which shows Chute's and Melville's alterations.



Left, a wash drawing made, probably c.1805, for a continuation of James Winston's *Theatric Tourist*, but never published, and now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. This, the earliest known picture of the Theatre Royal, shows clearly the ground floor adaptation of the two King Street houses to provide entrances to the auditorium.



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The interior of the Theatre Royal prior to its Second World War closure. Note only three rows of orchestra stalls in front of a benched pit, and the "cut-off" door between Pit and Dress Circle.  
*(Photograph: Victor Turf).*

beginning to crumble, yet the Proprietors, intent on preserving their dividends, still only patched and tinkered. Dry rot was reported in the Dress Circle in 1896 and cost £100 to put right, and within a year the Proprietors were faced with something like an ultimatum from the Corporation, from whom they leased the ground on which were built the houses fronting the theatre. These had become so ruinous that they had to be shored up, and the Corporation offered the reversion of their lease, due to expire in 1919, if the Proprietors agreed to replace them by new buildings costing not less than £1800.

Meanwhile Ford & Canning started a series of largely unfounded complaints, and in fact on one pretext or another they remained in a constant state of near-litigation with the Proprietors for many years. It is impossible not to wonder how far they hoped to depreciate the theatre property with a view to bidding for it a second time more successfully.<sup>8</sup>

With the prospect of new and much more valuable buildings on the King Street frontage, the Proprietors decided to renegotiate Carpenter's lease at an increased rent of £500 a year for the first 14 years, and in consideration of the Lessees only having the right to determine the lease after that period, £600 for the last seven years. The Proprietors were bitterly to regret giving up their own power to determine.

After something of an initial fiasco (the new frontage planned by the architect proved to be too short for the site by several feet) the Proprietors had the shock of finding that the lowest tender was substantially higher than anything they had contemplated, and even after ruthless pruning amounted to £2,375. They raised most of this money by temporary loan from the Bank, and built a notably characterless entrance to a unique theatre auditorium.

It was just at this juncture that the Royal Patent expired — and just at this juncture that Carpenter was summoned on eleven charges of selling liquor in the Theatre Bar after hours. The Committee were afraid this would prejudice the likelihood of renewing the Patent; the Lord Chamberlain, however, proved less interested in the manager's peccadilloes than in the theatre's fire precautions, and his extensive and stringent requirements, including rebuilding the proscenium and installing a fire-proof curtain; cost a further £500. Then new dressing rooms had to be built, and this meant another £600. In all nearly £4,000 was laid out, and in consideration of this Carpenter agreed that his rent should be increased by £100 per annum.

8 By one of Time's neat revenges, one of the owners of Ford & Canning (1947) is currently Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Theatre Royal.

At long last — nearly three years after the first proposal — the lease was signed on 5th February, 1904; and four days afterwards Frederick Carpenter died. His son Ernest promptly proposed forming a limited liability company composed of members of his family, principally his mother, his brother Arthur and himself; and while the Proprietors were still negotiating the renewal of the Patent, cut the Gordian knot by applying successfully to the local Licensing Magistrates for a Theatrical Licence, which made the Patent unnecessary; it was therefore allowed to lapse.

By the end of 1904 the Proprietors' overdraft was nearly £3,700 and they accepted gratefully the offer of Thomas Henry Ricketts Winwood of Taunton (a descendant of one of the original Proprietors) to lend them £3,500 at 4½% interest. One of the few cheerful items of news they received was that, the Carpenters having installed electricity in place of gas during the 1905/6 season, the fire insurance was substantially reduced.

No sooner was this hurdle surmounted than more troubles beset them. An entrepreneur by the name of James Murphy bought the adjoining land to the west of the Theatre (formerly the site of the Theatre Tavern) and erected a substantial warehouse which threatened to interfere with the Theatre's light. Tackled, Murphy prevaricated for months while steadily going on with the building, and hardly had he reluctantly agreed to pay £105 compensation than "Mr. Forse and Mr. Gane reported that they had examined certain serious cracks in the wall of the Theatre adjoining Mr. Murphy's new warehouse and were of opinion that they were caused by the overloading of the warehouse". More prevarication, demands and counter-offers, and eventually a court action took place, damages being laid at £550 (the Proprietors being finally awarded £300 and costs).

After this there was a breathing space. The Carpenters continued the policy of melodrama and pantomime with some success, though the type of audience they attracted may be gauged from a Minute "that the Lessees be called upon to take steps to prevent members of the audience from throwing missiles out of the window and thus damaging the roofs". At any rate Carpenter felt sufficiently established at the end of 1910 to put forward a proposal to float a Company which would buy the Theatre and some adjoining property, and rebuild completely at a cost of not less than £25,000, providing a much larger theatre with the principal entrance in Queen Charlotte Street. He offered to buy up the shares in the Theatre and repay the mortgage, but after two years' effort failed to raise the capital, and this grandiose scheme was abandoned.

Carpenter therefore turned his attention to the possibilities of modernising the existing property to compete with the new theatres, music halls and picture houses springing up all round. The most vital alteration needed was to raise the roof over the stage so that scenery could be flown instead of manhandled.

“At present we are greatly handicapped; for it means that we have to employ extra stage hands all the year round, and specially at Pantomime time, and visiting companies complain seriously about the damage done to their cloths, and some of them will not visit us on this account.”

Other requests included reseating the Dress Circle, improving the heating and redecorating, but as the total cost was £1,500, the Proprietors, still deeply in debt, declined all but minor improvements in cloakroom accommodation, heating and bar facilities.

Though thwarted in his ambitions, Carpenter was not yet done with company flotation, and at the end of 1912 turned himself and his mother into “The Bristol Old Theatre Ltd.” with a more modest capital of £100. Since his rent was much in arrears, the Proprietors were highly suspicious of this device, not without cause.

Business had taken a bad turn, and even the Prince’s Theatre was ceasing to attract, as touring companies concentrated on musical comedy and purely “commercial” plays. In this situation the ever resourceful Carpenter bethought him of the possibilities of the growing Repertory movement of which Miss Horniman’s Manchester company was the most famous exemplar. In November 1913 he startled theatrical Bristol by announcing “the most important engagement of the year” — a two-week season by Miss Horniman’s own company, playing mainly the controversial *Hindle Wakes*, but also including Galsworthy’s *The Silver Box*, Besier’s *Don*, and Shaw’s *Candida*. Part of a notice of the last-named will give some idea of the calibre of the Company:

“Miss Sybil Thorndike was the essence of shrewd tenderness, and her simplicity and gentleness in the last act were delightful to watch. Mr. Ernest Bodkin was not quite self-conscious enough as Morell, his ‘type’ might have been more fully marked. Mr. Lewis Casson was finely sensitive as Marchbanks, but looked a shade too old. Miss Muriel Pratt’s picture of ‘Prossy’, and Mr. Eliot Makeham as Mr. Burgess were both clever studies.”

Not all Bristolians were quite so impressed, however. One was so disgusted with Marchbanks that “the stillness of the auditorium was broken . . . by a penetrating voice calling upon someone to wring his neck!”

Surprised as they were at this unusual engagement at the lowly "Old", Bristol theatre lovers were not slow to react. While a most successful *Aladdin* (in which "James Gold and Charles Naughton, as Abanazar and Chee Kee, kept the house in roars of laughter") was delighting Christmas patrons, the recently formed Bristol Playgoers' Club was at work. The upshot was that a leading actress in Miss Horniman's Company, Muriel Pratt, brought a company of her own for three weeks in May, 1914.

Serious theatregoers of the time saw in the Repertory movement the possible salvation of the drama. "As the long-run system deals out to the provinces only popular plays exploited by speculative managers, it seems to us that a repertory system must come to save the theatre". With a company including Brember Wills, Clive Carey and George Holloway, as well as Muriel Pratt herself, and a repertoire of Shaw, Masefield, Wild and Besier, the season was artistically a great success, and financially sufficiently well supported for the Playgoers, after long consultations and negotiation, to announce plans for a much longer Repertory season at the Theatre Royal in the coming autumn.

The Joint Honorary Secretaries issued a letter outlining these plans, and asking for guarantees of support — they were aiming at a minimum of £1,600, and "Miss Pratt is prepared to give an advantage of 20 per cent on all bookings promised in advance". Enthusiasts rallied round, one of the leading spirits being Professor A. R. Skemp, Professor of English at Bristol University. The Duchess of Beaufort became a patron; the critic J. T. Grein wrote: "Critics are poor fellows, but put me down for a fiver". A public meeting at the Theatre Royal addressed by Lena Ashwell was a great success, and slowly but surely during the summer of 1914 the guarantees came in. The programme announced was imaginative and varied, ranging from *The Admirable Crichton* to a poetical drama, *Guenevere*, by Skemp, and from *Prunella* to *The Pigeon*.

The outbreak of war changed the whole situation. There was in some circles an almost hysterically violent feeling that anything not directly connected with the "war effort" should incontinently be stopped (thus resulting in hundreds of thousands being thrown out of work within a few months). Muriel Pratt circularised the guarantors, and the proportion in favour of continuing with the season was five to one, though the President of the Bristol Playgoers' Club resigned over the issue. As an emergency measure, the actors accepted reduced salaries and Carpenter a cut in rent.

The fourteen-week season accordingly opened on 31st August, with a special prologue by John Masefield, and artistically was a

triumph. Brember Wills, Clive Carey and Muriel Pratt from the summer company were joined by, among others, Margaret Dean and W. Bridges Adams (whose lighting effects in *Guenevere* won particular praise). Financially the results were less happy. Too many guarantors failed to fulfil their promises, with excuses, some genuine, some specious, about "the war". The Playgoers' Club made a special collection in December: this brought in £36 towards the deficit, but there was a good deal of doubt about the future.

A further serious blow was to come. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with the Christmas pantomime, and in order to keep the Company together till the Spring, Muriel Pratt looked for other premises. The two halls already licensed for drama — the Victoria Rooms and the Colston Hall — were under military requisition, so she applied for a temporary licence for the "Clifton Spa" to present a children's play followed by some light comedies. To the indignation of drama-lovers the application was turned down, despite the obvious hardship caused to the actors and the unlikelihood of any real clash of interests with the other commercial theatres.

So pantomime held sway. An enormous Union Jack served as front curtain for the Theatre Royal's *Jack and the Beanstalk* (which had Bobby Comber as Dame) and sundry "patriotic nights" were held, on one of which 250 men of "Bristol's Own"

"marched to the theatre headed by the recruiting band, and the latter, proceeding to the stage, gave the opening overture. The night will be remembered by the men in khaki present not only on account of the enjoyment of the pantomime but because of the good news as to the sinking of the Dresden, which was made known by means of 'Evening News' display bills. These were exhibited by members of the Company on the stage, and the crowded house cheered most enthusiastically".

Somehow Miss Pratt, now joined in management by Richard Coke, got most of her company together again, resuming her season on 12th April after a short series of lurid melodramas "from the Famous Stories in 'Heartsease Library'." Again the repertory was varied, though comedy predominated; again production and acting were widely praised; again promises of support were only partially honoured. Miss Pratt later recalled her takings as averaging £100 per week, which indicates that the house can hardly have been more than a quarter filled on most occasions.

Meanwhile Carpenter's position was going from bad to worse. The Minutes of the period are filled with the Proprietors' diffi-

culties in extracting rent, and they even resorted to collecting Muriel Pratt's £24 a week rent and deducting the weekly instalment of arrears from that. The Company on occasion had difficulty in saving their own belongings from being distrained. In June Mrs. Carpenter became bankrupt, and the indomitable Muriel Pratt offered to take a lease for three years at £600 a year — but the Proprietors thought (mistakenly) that they had a better offer in prospect and her application went no further.

So, sadly, died a promising experiment which but for the First World War might well have anticipated by thirty years the renewal of the name and status of the Theatre Royal which took place in the Second. But even so, more had been done than might then have appeared. In 1921 the Rotary Club of Bristol invited Muriel Pratt to address them, and her speech led almost directly to the backing of a new Repertory Company in the Lesser Colston Hall (later renamed the Little Theatre).

Mrs. Carpenter's bankruptcy initiated an interminable series of legal wrangles with the Committee of Proprietors; a syndicate took over the lease; and the most unlikely succession of shady and temporary managers exacerbated an already near-disastrous situation (one is not altogether surprised to find recorded in a Minute that the licence granted to one Mr. W. Goodwin Woodward in August 1916 was transferred in October "owing to his" (Woodward's) "nervous breakdown").

Repertory of a kind returned to the Theatre Royal under Hamilton Baines, the most nearly permanent of the various Managers for "Bristol Theatres Ltd." — but its highlights were *East Lynne* (paper handkerchiefs being issued to the audience), *Only a Mill Girl*, and *The Sorrows of Satan*. Ibsen's *Ghosts* was continually advertised as in preparation — not, one fears, for the best of reasons! — but was never in the end produced. In September 1919 the Theatre was put up for public auction, but the reserve price was not reached, and the affairs of the theatre continued to lurch from crisis to crisis. Ernest Milton brought a Shakespeare Company and is said to have played Shylock to an audience of four in the Pit.

In 1921 it looked as though deadlock had been reached. The Licensing Magistrates demanded a secondary exist from the Gallery as a safety measure. Water was pouring through the roof, and the theatre would have to be closed unless immediate repairs were done. The front arches in King Street were showing signs of subsidence owing (once again) to overloading of Murphy's adjacent warehouse; and the Bank bluntly refused to consider a loan on the security of Corporation Stock.



In the nick of time — for the licence ran out on 10th December — the Secretary reported on 7th December

“the result of the adjourned application on Monday before the Licensing Justices, when the Corporation Building Surveyor reported that he had that morning been shown a Staircase leading down from the Gallery Canteen and Bar to the Ground Floor main entrance — which with sundry slight alterations and expense would satisfy the requirements of the Bench”.

This enabled the Secretary to obtain a provisional licence for the theatre and reduced the builders' estimates considerably, but as almost every rent cheque received from the Lessees was dishonoured on presentation, the Proprietors were in a sorry plight. At last in February 1924 the Theatre Company went into liquidation and the Proprietors obtained possession; immediately the building was put up for sale. On May 1st “the Secretary reported that he had arranged . . . with eight different firms to attend and remove their crates and empty bottles &c. from the premises . . . that there were still several empties on the premises which were unsaleable”. He and another Committee member “had attended at the Theatre . . . and found sundry necessary repairs required to keep the premises wind and water tight — and that the premises as a whole were in a shockingly dirty state — refuse being piled up anywhere — some of it rotting”.

Finally through the agency of C. A. Tricks & Son (a name well known in Bristol theatrical circles) a lessee was found in Douglas Millar, acting in conjunction with Robert Courtneidge and Milton Bode.

It is a remarkable fact that, however low the Theatre Royal's reputation has sunk from time to time, any genuine attempt to revive its glories has always evoked a wealth of sentiment (if not always much more). The prestige of the past has never been quite dismissed. A wave of enthusiasm greeted Douglas Millar when he reopened a thoroughly cleaned, attractively redecorated and generally refurbished Theatre Royal with his first pantomime, *Aladdin*, on Boxing Day, 1924. “Without exaggeration”, wrote the *Western Daily Press*, “the production is the best all round Bristol has witnessed for a few Christmases . . . Incidentally, the theatre itself is a vastly improved and more cosy and comfortable rendezvous than we can remember it to have been, and its new and pleasing appointments add very considerably to the enjoyment of a visit”.

The Lessees were so encouraged by the receipts of the pantomime that they exercised their option under the lease to purchase

the Theatre, beating the Proprietors down from £10,000 to £8,500. The Trust Deed was wound up, unclaimed shares (including one dating back to 1819) being distributed among the other holders, who eventually received over £108 each.

After the fairly predictable success of the pantomime, however, Millar's touch became somewhat uncertain. Carlton Wallace's Repertory Company, which promised "a programme of old masterpieces, the best of modern plays and such that has never been staged before in Bristol", in fact only produced a succession of highly coloured dramas, and despite the introduction of twice-nightly performances, by the end of the summer Millar "could only conclude that unrelieved melodrama has not a sufficient following in Bristol to be remunerative".

The alternative he provided was the engagement of some first class touring companies, starting with the Irish Players from the Abbey Theatre on their pre-London tour, when Laurence Cowan's *Biddy* was given its world première, and Bristolians had the opportunity of seeing Harry Hutchinson, Maire O'Neill and Arthur Sinclair. The innovation increasingly caught on, but after the pantomime there was a reversion to "popular" repertory.

Despite this vacillating policy Millar was undoubtedly beginning to re-establish the Theatre Royal as a venue for serious playgoers, and it was the Theatre Royal that was chosen for a three-week experiment in opera production which would alone have made his management memorable. Under the inspiration of Dr. Napier Miles, the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra was engaged with Dr. Adrian Boult (as he then was) as principal conductor, and a company including Louise Trenton, formerly with the D'Oyly Carte Company, Dorothy Dorsay and Stuart Wilson. Among the productions were *School for Lovers* (Mozart's *Così fan Tutte*, then a rarity), *Dido and Aeneas*, de Falla's *Puppet Show of Master Pedro*, and *Entente Cordiale* by Ethel Smythe, who conducted her own work; as well as short operas by Napier Miles, Stanford, Vaughan Williams and Clive Carey.

With fifty orchestral players and a hundred singers, the conditions backstage were indescribably crowded and chaotic, with improvised dressing rooms springing up in every corner. Nevertheless, in spite of some under-rehearsal, the season was quite a success. In a letter read on the last night, Napier Miles wrote:

"The support given us has been most gratifying, increasing steadily in numbers and enthusiasm each week. If the houses had only been consistently fuller during the first week the financial result would be considerably better".

He was not the last promoter to complain thus of the theatre-going habits of Bristolians.

Miles asked for guarantees and subscriptions for a similar season the following year, but it was decided to use the Colston Hall instead because of its greater size and better facilities.

The opera season was followed by another piece of enterprise by Millar, the production of *False Dawn*, a drama by F. E. C. Habgood, a well-known local solicitor. The play itself creaked somewhat, and the cast was decidedly patchy, but Millar himself made a great personal success as Angelo Nasari, a violin maker.

Amateur and touring companies filled up the interval before the production of *Puss in Boots*, in which Millar's daughter Sheila Douglas Millar made an attractive début as Second Girl. George Lacy played Dame, having been generally marked out as a "young artiste with a future" when he played Tinbad the Tailor the year before.

After this the pattern of Repertory Seasons (largely consisting of melodramas) and Pantomime became established. Frank H. Fortescue was the principal provider of Repertory, beginning a fifteen-year connection with the Theatre Royal in 1927, but there were also visits from the Elephant and from Morton Powell's Repertory Companies. Millar himself supervised most of the pantomimes; he had for years been a martyr to arthritis, but he carried out his management indomitably, even though he had to be bodily carried from pit to gallery and back when overseeing a production.

Millar finally retired in 1931 and was succeeded by King. Revue began to catch on nationally, and touring revues — sometimes staying several weeks at a time with changes of programme — began to alternate with Repertory. Prices were slashed in an attempt to compete with the Music Halls and cinemas; in 1932 the seats ranged from 4d. to 1s. 3d. Cut price tickets were lavishly issued to local factories so that often the house was virtually "papered".

However, there was the occasional gleam of success. By a brilliant piece of publicity, and the generous co-operation of the local press, George Fearon made the visit of *Ridgeway's Parade* (a touring revue based on a popular B.B.C. programme) a week to remember. Capitalising on a critic's neat phrase, "a diamond among the dust", he so built up publicity for the show that by Saturday night mounted police had to be called in to control the crowds.

The pantomime, too, was almost always a certain "draw", and indeed brought in many Bristolians who would never have

dreamed of entering the Theatre Royal at any other time in the year. Millar maintained a name for both beauty and fun in his pantomimes, which was kept up by his successors. In the mid-thirties, Randolph Sutton began to take a hand. Besides taking a nominal part in the show he would usually do one of his famous "turns" as himself, and this was looked forward to as the titbit of the pantomime. Harry Tate, engaged with his son Ronald to play in *Little Bo-Peep* in 1938/39, did likewise; though one critic felt bound to comment that this panto. was a "Bo-Peep pantomime with curiously little Bo-Peep story", it is unlikely many members of the audience were greatly concerned.

Revue and pantomime continued to hold sway after the outbreak of the Second World War. The management were so afraid of the effect of the war on the takings of the first wartime pantomime that they induced the Company to take part on a sharing basis. However, in the event their fears were entirely belied, and the actors came away with appreciably larger salaries than they would normally have received.

Miraculously, the theatre was relatively little damaged by bombing. Indeed, after one night raid the Theatre Royal was for a time the only place of entertainment still open in central Bristol, though evening performances were abolished in the early part of 1941. *Red Riding Hood* was succeeded by the comedy-revue *Happiness Ahead* — a rather inappropriate title, for it was played only one night before a further blitz closed the theatre for a fortnight.

When the Theatre Royal did reopen, it was to advertise "FOR-BIDDEN FRUIT — for ADULTS only . . . You can get home at night Before Dark". Similar dramas succeeded, often with a mid-week change of title, but on 3rd May, after a three-day run of *Sweeny Tod*, the Theatre Royal closed once more. This closure might well have been final, for the two surviving partners in the ownership of the Theatre, Robert Courtneidge and Milton Bode, died within a few months of each other, and at the end of 1941 their executors put the theatre up for sale — even as recently as this being advertised as seating about 1,140. The auction was fixed for 28th January, 1942.

Surrounded by business premises and largely depreciated as a theatre, the obvious fate of this most famous of provincial theatres was to be sold for its site value, or for commercial purposes. Concern about this was widely expressed, and the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol, under the active Chairmanship of Mr. Wilfrid Leighton, resolved to make every effort to preserve such a historic building. Hearing that Mr. C. H. W. Davey of

Bristol Metal Agencies Ltd. was interested commercially, they approached him, and Mr. Davey met them with a most generous gesture: that he would provide the purchase money if not above £12,500, the building to be reconveyed to him if the preservation project proved unsuccessful after a stated period. The *ad hoc* Committee formed by the Council had to face the possibility of the price going higher than Mr. Davey's limit, and Mr. E. Fuller Eberle generously guaranteed a further £2,500.

At the auction the theatre, complete with furnishing and fittings, was knocked down for £10,500, and at once conveyed into the names of Wilfrid Leighton, E. F. Eberle, E. J. Taylor and Colonel Mark Whitwill as Trustees. In May the Lord Mayor (the late Alderman E. T. Cozens) launched a public appeal for £25,000 at a meeting at the Theatre itself; Robert Donat recited Garrick's original Prologue, and the "thunder run" was heard once more overhead. Mr. H. W. Maxwell, of the City Museum and Art Gallery, acted as a most energetic Honorary Secretary of the Appeal.

Originally the Council had thought in terms solely of preserving a unique historical building, but gradually the hope crept in that after all it might be restored to living use. In October the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (later the Arts Council) made a definite offer to lease the theatre for 21 years, to restore it to a reasonable condition, and to use any profits to recoup their expenses, build up a reserve fund for productions and refund the Trustees' advances.

This admirable arrangement, however, had two embarrassing consequences. One was that the public assumed that all finance was now taken care of, and donations came to a virtual stop. The second was that Mr. Davey very reasonably now required that the advance made by his Company should be repaid. Since in wartime conditions the public appeal had failed to bring in the purchase money, the Trustees, by then including Mr. (now Sir) Foster Robinson and Messrs. F. M. Burriss and F. C. Burgess, raised the necessary sum on their personal guarantees. It has been insufficiently realised to how great an extent the Theatre was saved by the generosity of certain private individuals, rather than by "public" action.

C.E.M.A., as a national body, was however in a much better position to obtain the necessary licences in wartime for the renovation of the building. The benched pit was reseatd as stalls and was slightly raked; the gallery seating in the centre portion was halved by turning alternate rows into back rests, the sides with their old benches (very doubtfully described as "original 18th

Century”) being railed off from use. Mr. J. Ralph Edwards re-decorated the theatre charmingly in what may well have been the original colour scheme of green and gold.

On 11th May, 1943, the Theatre was formally reopened after the longest continuous closure in its history. Dame Sybil Thorn-dyke recited a special prologue written by Herbert Farjeon, and the play was Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, first staged in Bristol on 19th July, 1773, only four months after its original production at Covent Garden.

So was reborn the Theatre Royal, Bristol.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am again grateful to the staff of the Bristol Newspaper Library and of the City Archives Department for their friendly help, and to Miss Sybil Rosenfeld of the Society for Theatre Research, and Miss Barbara Mogford, for reading and commenting on the draft.

The Secretary of the Bristol Playgoers’ Club gave me access to the Minutes of the period 1913-1915 and permission to quote from them. The final pages, dealing with the years 1941-43, are closely based on an unpublished account by Mr. Wilfrid Leighton, until recently Chairman of the Trustees of the Theatre Royal, and I am very grateful to him for allowing me to make use of this information.

Additionally I should like to thank all those who responded to my appeal for information about this neglected period of the Theatre Royal’s history; particularly Miss Sue Jackson, whose memento of Kate Terry’s farewell is reproduced in this pamphlet; Mr. George Dare; Mr. George Fearon; Mr. Alec Lavers and Mr. Edward Purchase.

Mrs. E. Brean, now presiding over the Stalls Bar at the Theatre Royal, provided the photograph of the 20th Century interior of the theatre taken by Victor Turl, and much lively information besides. I am also indebted to the Mitchell Library, Sydney, for permission to reproduce the painting of the Theatre exterior in the early 19th Century, and to the City Archivist for that of the Theatre in 1841.

## PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS

1. *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite (out of print).
2. *Bristol and Burke* by P. T. Underdown.
3. *The Theatre Royal: the first seventy years* by Kathleen Barker.
4. *The Merchant Adventurers of Bristol in the Fifteenth Century* by E. M. Carus-Wilson.
5. *The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* by Walter Minchinton.
6. *Thomas Chatterton* by Basil Cottle.
7. *Bristol and the Slave Trade* by C. M. MacInnes.
8. *The Steamship Great Western* by Grahame Farr.
9. *Mary Carpenter of Bristol* by R. J. Saywell.
10. *The Chartists in Bristol* by John Cannon.
11. *The Steamship Great Britain* by Grahame Farr.
12. *Ferdinando Gorges and New England* by C. M. MacInnes.
13. *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages* by J. W. Sherborne.

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